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INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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RUEHAS/AMEMBASSY ALGIERS PRIORITY 0237
RUEHAM/AMEMBASSY AMMAN PRIORITY 3051
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 0850
RUEHLB/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT PRIORITY 1005
RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS PRIORITY 5362
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 4822
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL PRIORITY 0314
RUEHKH/AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM PRIORITY 0012
RUEHOS/AMCONSUL LAGOS PRIORITY 0068
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 2950
RUEHNR/AMEMBASSY NAIROBI PRIORITY 0229
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 0821
RUEHYN/AMEMBASSY SANAA PRIORITY 1732
RUEHFT/AMCONSUL FRANKFURT PRIORITY 1601
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI PRIORITY 0066
RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE PRIORITY 0053
RUEHMT/AMCONSUL MONTREAL PRIORITY 0001
RUSBPW/AMCONSUL PESHAWAR PRIORITY 0193
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RULSDMK/TRANSPORTATION DEPT WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/FAA NATIONAL HQ WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0063
RHMFIUU/TSA HQ WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/HOMELAND SECURITY CENTER WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY 0299
RHMFISS/DEPT OF HOMELAND SECURITY WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RIYADH 000066

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/11/2020
TAGS: [EAIR](#) [PREL](#) [ASEC](#) [ECON](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: SAUDI LEADERS STUNG BY NEW TSA SCREENING RULES
DESPITE KINGDOM'S SECURITY RECORD

REF: A. SECSTATE 1187
[1](#)B. RIYADH 62

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Classified By: Acting Deputy Chief of Mission Lisa M. Carle
reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (SBU) Following news of TSA's January 3 designation of Saudi Arabia as a "country of interest," Saudi leaders from the General Civil Aviation Authority (GACA), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Culture and Information we talked to all have expressed surprise and dismay that their country was among the few to be "singled out." While all agree on the U.S. need to take robust measures to protect its citizens, they feel strongly that the new U.S. rules do not reflect the Saudi government's aviation security record and strong cooperation with U.S. aviation and counter-terrorism authorities. GACA's chief of aviation security specifically noted his country's ambitious airport security upgrade and integration plans underway, including the 1.7 billion SAR program to acquire new security equipment. The Deputy Foreign Minister, noting that angry Saudi reaction would likely deter Saudis from traveling to the US and undermine bilateral cooperation in many spheres, pointedly asked that

we urgently relay the Saudi government's concerns on this matter to Washington, which we believe are shared at the highest levels of the SAG. Other officials have already suggested suspending travel and canceling major purchases of US military systems. Details on the public reaction to the new rules will be reported septel. End summary.

HEAD OF CIVIL AVIATION SECURITY CONVEYS
SAUDI "SURPRISE" AT NEW REGULATIONS

12. (SBU) The Director of Aviation Security at Saudi Arabia's General Authority of Civil Aviation (GACA), Abdulhameed Abalary, told Econcouns January 9 that he and senior Saudi leaders including King Abdullah were greatly "surprised" that the U.S. Transportation Security Administration (TSA) included the Kingdom in the list of 14 countries subject to new air passenger screening regulations. While he accepted that the U.S. has the sovereign right to establish procedures to protect its citizens, Abalary said the aviation security standards in Saudi Arabia were "very different" from other countries of interest, such as Afghanistan and Somalia. He emphasized that his country's aviation security record was unblemished since 9/11 and that Saudi Arabia has one of the two highest aviation security standards in the region. Abalary said both Saudi Arabia and the United States have made the protection of all air passengers their highest priority, and Saudi Arabia also places great value on facilitating legitimate travel between our countries, especially the 30,000 Saudi students studying in the United States, who will become the next generation of the Kingdom's technocratic and business elite.

13. (SBU) The aviation security director emphasized that Saudi

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Arabia was caught off guard by the designation, particularly in light of the long history of cooperation with the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and TSA on civil aviation security. He described his "constructive, wonderful" visit in early December to TSA headquarters and technical facilities, and he conveyed GACA's excitement about its forthcoming MOU with TSA. Despite Saudi leaders' surprise at the new regulations, Abalary said GACA already was implementing full-body pat-downs of 100 percent of all passengers and physical examinations of all accessible property. He invited Econoffs to tour Saudi airports to confirm they are in compliance. Abalary repeatedly emphasized that Saudi Arabia's designation as a country of interest does not reflect the country's security record and historic cooperation with the United States, and he asked Econcouns to share GACA's views with Washington. He said he hoped Washington would lift the measure related to Saudi travelers as soon as they had a clearer picture of our bilateral aviation security cooperation.

GACA'S AMBITIOUS AIRPORT SECURITY UPGRADE

14. (SBU) Abalary described GACA's 1.7 billion Saudi riyal (\$453 million) National Integration Project for Civil Air Security to upgrade and integrate its airport security network, including all 27 Saudi airports. The new equipment will likely include body imaging equipment once they resolve the religiously sensitive issue of screening women. GACA will also install additional airport perimeter security equipment (including radar, thermal, infrared, biometrics, and perimeter security equipment). He said 35 million riyals (\$9.3 million) had been appropriated for an Advanced Passenger Information System (APIS), which should be implemented by the end of 2010. GACA also plans to stand up a command and control center at Jeddah's international airport to improve their ability to respond to hijackings and other incidents.

DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTER WARNS

DESIGNATION COULD UNDERMINE COOPERATION

15. (SBU) Saudi Deputy Foreign Minister for Multilateral Relations Dr. Prince Turki bin Mohammed raised the new TSA regulations in a January 10 meeting with A/DCM (for other topic discussed, ref B). He told A/DCM he was very disappointed by the designation of Saudi Arabia as a country of interest, which makes Saudi Arabia feel and look like a "black sheep." The Prince said he understood that America's first priority is to save lives, but the U.S. approach should be to screen all passengers and not single out countries publicly. He agreed with A/DCM's assertion that it was reasonable given finite resources to concentrate security screening on travelers linked to routes of travel (e.g., originating in Yemen), but he said the U.S. should have found a way to keep such routes and countries confidential. A/DCM emphasized that the list of countries was not intended to be made public and that leaks were regrettable. Beyond this, the list would evolve to reflect the nature of the threat.

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The Prince opined that the attempted bombing was a failure of U.S. intelligence and therefore the U.S. should focus on fixing its internal procedures, rather than "blaming Saudi Arabia" or adding new layers of passenger screening that terrorists will easily circumvent. The Prince reported that during a large dinner party the previous evening, he had been asked repeatedly (and "only") about the new TSA regulations. Turki noted that we have one of the "closest bilateral relationships of any two countries," which included thousands of Saudi students in the United States. He hoped to avoid pressure for reciprocal measures, and closed by asking the A/DCM to urgently convey the SAG's concerns to Washington.

MINISTRY OF CULTURE AND INFORMATION
DELAYS MEETING BECAUSE OF REGULATIONS

16. (SBU) Embassy and Consulate officers are hearing a constant stream of negative comments and references in the course of conducting other business. As an example, contacts at the Ministry of Culture and Information's Eastern Province Directorate delayed a meeting with Consulate Dhahran in light of the new TSA regulations and the resulting "difficult time" in our bilateral relationship.

17. (C) Military contacts have voiced extreme displeasure in meetings with Embassy officials, with some going so far as to suggest that the new TSA procedures might negatively affect Saudi deliberations on the purchase of ships and systems in conjunction with the Eastern Fleet Modernization Program.

COMMENT

18. (C) The Saudi government keenly appreciates U.S. security concerns, particularly in view of the August 27 failed attack on Assistant Interior Minister Mohammed bin Naif with a device apparently similar to the bomb used by Abdulmutallab. Saudi officials are nevertheless perplexed and frustrated that the Kingdom has been, as they see it, publicly branded as a member of "the group of shame" of state sponsors of terrorism and failed states, despite our increasingly strong partnership in counter-terrorism and aviation security. We urge prompt engagement to explain the U.S. action and identify what specific concerns led to Saudi Arabia's inclusion in the list of Countries of Concern and what steps the Kingdom can take to mitigate these concerns. We believe Saudi authorities would be very willing to cooperate on specific initiatives, such as installing more advanced screening technology in airports, to address specific security deficiencies.

SMITH